INTRODUCTION:

GIL: What lies before you is a remnant of a lost empire.

MIKE KELLEY: There were streetcar lines everywhere! Areas you wouldn't think about! Route 9 was a streetcar line, main streets in different towns, they weren't roads, they were streetcar lines.

GIL: In 1920, streetcar lines ran up and down almost every major street in Boston!

JOHN RODERICK: All those lines, the bus lines, all trolley tracks.

GIL: By the late 1950s, almost every streetcar line in Boston had been replaced by a bus line. The Boston Elevated Railway operated on 483 miles of streetcar tracks in Boston in 1916. Today's MBTA maintains only 28 miles of streetcar tracks.

WHAT WAS/HOW IT STARTED:

GIL: This non-revenue trackage is all that remains of Boston's terminated trolley lines. Today, the MBTA uses these tracks to give B streetcars access to the Reservoir Carhouse that is adjacent to the C and D lines. These tracks, along with parts of the B and C lines, were the first tracks in the City of Boston laid specifically for streetcar use.

GIL: Boston's first electric streetcar line started operating in 1889. A former horsecar line, the streetcar line ran from a car barn on Allston's Braintree Street down Harvard Avenue until it reached Brookline's Coolidge Corner, where it turned left onto Beacon Street and continued onward to Boston's Park Square. About a year later, new tracks now used by the C line opened to extend this line further west up Beacon Street to Brookline's Cleveland Circle, where the Chestnut Hill Avenue tracks you saw earlier were built for the line to diverge towards Commonwealth Avenue, where the B line now runs, to continue to its terminus at Lake Street.

GIL: After the West End Street Railway Company assumed a monopoly over Boston's rail operations in 1887, many horse car railways, for example the tracks that later became the indelible A line, were electrified with overhead wires and converted to run streetcars. Many new street railways were also laid by the Company specifically for electric streetcars. The former streetcar trackage in Kenmore Square, as well as many tracks in South Dorchester and Mattapan, were laid in the 1890s and 1900s following the Company's founding.

GIL: After the Boston Elevated Railway Company assumed the entirety of the West End Street Railway's streetcar operations in 1896, Boston's streetcar system experienced its greatest growth yet as new trolley lines began to be built to Boston's outer boroughs. The construction of streetcar lines contributed significantly to the growth of the City of Boston.

MIKE KELLEY: Trolleys built the suburbs. You didn't have to live in Boston, you could commute to work.

JOHN KYPER: Blue Hill Avenue, like Commonwealth Avenue and Beacon St, they were built as streetcar corridors, that was part of the real estate development that built those streets.

GIL: As more and more streetcar lines were laid, a series of real estate developments were constructed in Boston. In the late 1890s and early 1900s, many new houses, particularly brownstones and triple-decker apartment buildings, were built in boroughs of Boston such as Dorchester, Roxbury, Jamaica Plain and Brighton, as well in the separate Town of Brookline, around new streetcar lines.

GIL: Streetcars ran along main roads in such boroughs, either through traffic on tracks placed in the street, or in dedicated right-of-ways running through street medians. Most streetcar lines were street-running; however, other than a short portion of today's E-line through Mission Hill and the aforementioned non-revenue trackage in Brighton, no street-running streetcar lines operate in Boston today.

GIL: Many of Boston's original streetcar lines fed into the Tremont Street Subway, which originally consisted of the present-day Boylston and Park Street subway stations. Opening in 1897, the Subway was the first American subway ever built and was constructed in order to ease congestion on Boston's Tremont Street, which was where over thirty streetcar lines that fed into Boston terminated in street-running form.

GIL: Between 1901 and 1908, heavy rail trains from the Boston Elevated Railway's Main Line Elevated shared the subway with streetcars while the Washington Street Tunnel was under construction.

GIL: The Main Line Elevated, fondly referred to as the "El", was the predecessor of today's Orange Line. Serviced by heavy rail cars rather than streetcars, it ran above Boston's Washington Street from Jamaica Plain to Charlestown from 1901 until it was torn down in 1987.

GIL: Imagine that today, every Orange Line train, every Green Line train, and about 30 additional streetcar lines ran through Park Street Station. To be fair, some of the pressure was alleviated once the Atlantic Avenue Elevated, a second route for the "El" to take through downtown, opened after a few months; however, that should provide a good idea of just how much traffic there was through the Tremont Street Subway originally. Even in 1911, three years after El trains stopped running through the subway, 3600 streetcars ran through the subway daily.

THE BEGINNING OF THE END:

LEN BACHELDER: The first time that I came into Downtown Boston and we saw a PCC car going through the subway and I said "Look daddy, there's a bus in the subway!" It looked like a bus to me.

GIL: Already by the 1920s, the Boston Elevated Railway Company had begun replacing streetcars on a few of its lines with buses. A Boston Elevated Railway map from 1915 displays only streetcar lines; by 1925, an updated map shows buses operating on some former streetcar routes, particularly in Boston's West End as well as in Cambridge to a lesser extent.

GIL: The Boston Elevated Railway's streetcar system peaked in 1918, with a total of 492 miles of active trackage. By 1940, that number had fallen to about 330, and by 1950 it stood at 227.

JOHN RODERICK: The steel rail streetcars, pretty much by the 1940s were gone. There weren't very many existing after that. There were a few lines that hung on; most were gone by that time.

GIL: By 1940, the Boston Elevated Railway only operated 51 streetcar lines; by 1953, under the new MTA, 19 of those lines remained.

JOHN RODERICK: There was an intermediate technology which was the trackless trolleys.

FRANKLYN SALIMBENE: Most of the lines that were converted initially were trackless trolleys. They kept the wires and they just made them more maneuverable.

MIKE KELLEY: You just strung up [electric] wire. You didn't have to worry about a track system, now you had something that could go around obstructions.

FRANKLYN SALIMBENE: I grew up in East Boston. I remember streetcars running all over East Boston. And then what they did is they changed streetcars to trackless trolleys. They didn't do buses right away.

MIKE KELLEY: By 1955, they had converted 43 routes to trackless trolleys.

FRANKLYN SALIMBENE: They stopped the streetcar one day, they started trackless trolley service the next day. It was a very seamless change.

MIKE KELLEY: In 1960 you have a change of management, and in two years they got rid of all but this system of trackless trolleys [the four lines that remain in Cambridge today]. And they determined in 1960 that the only trolley cars that would be left running in the City of Boston would either be in a tunnel or on their own private right-of-way.

GIL: Now that most streetcar routes had been converted to buses, significantly fewer streetcar lines utilized the Tremont Street Subway. By 1962, all of the streetcar lines that once ran through the Pleasant Street Portal into the subway were no longer served by streetcars, and the Portal was subsequently sealed.

GIL: By 1964, when the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority [MBTA] took over operations of Boston's transit system from the Metropolitan Transportation Authority, only six of the 51 lines serviced by streetcars in 1940 were not serviced by electric trackless trolleys or diesel buses.

THE FINAL CONSOLIDATION:

GIL: The streetcar lines that still ran in 1964 became the Green Line that Boston's riders are familiar with today.

JOHN RODERICK: The Green Line is so named because it traverses much of the Emerald Necklace [Park Network].

GIL: The streetcar that still ran between Dorchester and Mattapan through Milton was the exception; it was renamed the Mattapan High-Speed Line and still operates today as an extension of the Red Line subway branch.

GIL: Because so few streetcar lines were left, the MBTA kept the buses numbered by the traditional system and alphanumerically[sic: alphabetically] renamed the streetcar lines based upon their geographic orientation.

GIL: Aside from the Mattapan Line, all of the remaining lines ran through the Tremont Street Subway. The Watertown Line was the northernmost remaining line; it became the A Line. The Commonwealth Avenue Line, which ran to Boston College, became the B Line. At Packard's Corner in Brighton, the A and B Lines joined to run through Boston University and to the Subway.

GIL: The Beacon Street Line that ran to Cleveland Circle in Brookline became the C Line. The Riverside line, a recent addition which ran along a former Boston & Albany Railroad right-of-way through Newton and Brookline, became the D Line. Finally, the Arborway Streetcar, which at the time ran to the Arborway in Jamaica Plain, became the E Line.

GIL: More bustitutions were yet to come. In 1969, the A Line's streetcars were replaced with diesel buses. Later, in 1985, the E Line was temporarily cut short to Brigham Circle, with diesel buses replacing streetcar service to the Arborway. Streetcar service to the intermediate Heath Street resumed in 1989, but the Arborway branch continues to be served by buses to this day. As of 2013, the B, C, D, abbreviated E, and Mattapan lines are the only remaining streetcar lines in Boston.

WHAT'S LEFT TODAY:

GIL: Many remnants of the truncated lines still exist today.

JOHN RODERICK: It takes a little imagination. The short answer is yes, if you know what it is you're looking at.

GIL: Old unused catenary poles stand in plain sight on main streets all over Boston!

JOHN RODERICK: They're just fixed pieces of stuff that has either found some other use or didn't need to be taken up.

GIL: Next time you pass through places where streetcars once ran, such as Harvard and Washington Streets in Brookline, the Egleston Square area in Roxbury and along the old A-line route in Brighton, keep your eyes open for catenary poles. While some poles serve no purpose, others have been recycled since their streetcars stopped running.

GIL: When streetcars stopped running along the Harvard Bridge in 1949, the trolley poles were all converted into streetlamps that still stand today.

GIL: Old streetcar catenary poles support the wires for all four of the trackless trolley routes that remain in Boston. Along the trackless lines in Watertown, Cambridge and Belmont, old streetcar tracks protrude clearly out of the pavement.

MIKE KELLEY: We keep joking about it, if they wait long enough they'll be able to run streetcars again because the tracks are going to come through everywhere!

GIL: Virtually every trolley pole that once serviced the Arborway branch of the E line stillstands. To this day, some Jamaica Plain residents, particularly the Arborway Committee, advocate for restoration of service further down the E line.

FRANKLYN SALIMBENE: In January of '99, the MBTA said it was not feasible from an engineering perspective. Part of their reasoning was the Americans With Disabilities Act, and part of their reason was that if they restored the line in the street, emergency vehicles wouldn't be able to get through. A number of the merchants on Centre Street were opposed because they thought if the streetcar comes down it's going to slow down traffic and we're going to lose parking.

GIL: The Arborway line remained "temporarily suspended" for years afterwards. The MBTA considered bringing it back, but many were of the opinion that the streetcar would be an obstacle to car traffic. In 2008, the tracks in the street from Heath Street to Arborway were completely paved over.

GIL: Nowadays, most drivers do not favor street-running streetcars.

MIKE KELLEY: From about 1900 to about 1920, that was what happened, that's what you did, that's how you got around, and then the car took over.

GIL: Driving has become a way of life, and anything that slows drivers down is not acceptable.

GIL: As a result of such perception, the only revenue street-running streetcar line left in Boston is the short section of the E line along Huntington Avenue between Brigham Circle and Heath Street.

GIL: Often, street-running tracks were simply paved over and exist today as a time capsule in the street. Tracks can be found poking out of the pavement of many of Boston's streets. On Babcock Street near the old Boston Braves Field, tracks are visible from the old Braves Field Loop. A little further down Comm Ave, a stub of the A-Line trackage remains where it diverged from the B-Line at Packard's Corner.

GIL: The Suffolk Downs Loop is a prime remnant of streetcar service in East Boston. The tracks there are still fully in place and could run streetcars today if the T so desired.

GIL: If you look hard enough, you can find even more remnants of East Boston's streetcar service along the Blue Line. While it now uses subway cars, the Blue Line from Maverick Square to Bowdoin was originally constructed as a subway to carry streetcars from East Boston to Downtown Boston. When the Blue Line was converted to run subway cars in 1925, the streetcar platforms in the tunnels were raised. One can still see remnants of the old streetcar platforms at the edges of Blue Line subway platforms today.

REFLECTIONS:

GIL: Since streetcar lines were eliminated, the MBTA has operated an extensive and reliable network of bus routes.

LEN BACHELDER: The route network wasn't all that different from what the bus network is today. All of the bus lines that are now running out of Dudley Station, were streetcars in my recollection. The major difference is that there were more lines coming out of the subway.

GIL: Looking back at the city Boston once was, it is unsurprising that so many streetcar lines were eliminated.

JOHN KYPER: In the 1950s, Boston was very run down, and in those days their attitude was out with the old, in with the new! We'll just tear down Scollay Square and end up with this big brick desert here! A couple of big government buildings!

LEN BACHELDER: During World War Two, it was very difficult to keep things in proper repair. The cars were old, and the Type Fours were in terrible condition. And they just got worse during the War years, because there was double the riding because people couldn’t drive their cars, and there were no people resources to do the maintenance. By the end of the war, everything was in bad shape. A tremendous amount of money would have been required to put everything in decent working order again.

GIL: Rather than repair what was already there, the City of Boston embarked to replace old infrastructure with new. It must have been easier to simply dispatch new buses onto roads rather than repair streetcar infrastructure, not to mention that buses were perceived as a more modern, and therefore more relevant, solution.

LEN BACHELDER: It was cheaper to operate buses, it was cheaper to maintain the routes. They could run on any street you wanted to without any extra expense. In most cases, they appealed to the public more than streetcars did. Streetcars were falling apart, they had a couple of bad accidents when the brakes failed on the cars. They were noisy, dirty, and people just perceived buses as being more modern.

GIL: Anyone who has driven a car on streetcar tracks knows that tracks can make for a bumpy ride and can be slippery during wet weather.

FRANKLYN SALIMBENE: A streetcar is in the middle lane, automobiles are coming along the right hand lane, and it's through traffic. So the conductor opens the door, and the passengers step off into the street into the face of oncoming automobiles.

GIL: A driver cannot pass a stopping streetcar. A bus or trackless trolley, which stops curbside, is much easier to safely pass.

MIKE KELLEY: All that stuff was built when there weren't any cars. A lot of lines were built quickly with not a lot of thought to them, because there wasn't any street traffic. The idea was just to build and build and build and get these things out there! And so there wasn't a lot of thought to that type of stuff in the future. And then, when the cars did start coming, they started interfering with trolley lines built, because the trolley lines were a victim of their own success because now you have more and more people. Yes, people riding, but yes, people started buying a car. That's what's hilarious: all these houses are old-they don't even have garages! That's why you've got people fighting for parking spots!

ROLLING STOCK REFLECTIONS:

GIL: An advantage of streetcars is their reliability. The trolley cars that served Boston's streetcar lines from the 1930s onward have since proven to be extremely reliable. These PCC trolleys, which ended service on the Green Line in 1985, continue to ride on the Mattapan High-Speed Line today.

GIL: The Mattapan PCCs success is a testament to streetcars' proven reliability.

MIKE KELLEY: Diesel buses don't last nearly as long as a trackless. The problem is that because of the equipment, whether it's a trolley car or a trackless trolley, because the electric vehicles last so much longer, now you have a vehicle that's sitting out there for 30 years, of course it's not going to look the same as something that just came off the showroom floor.

GIL: Compared to diesel buses, which typically do not last more than twenty years, electric streetcars can last forever if properly taken care of. Streetcars that are over 100 years old still run regularly at trolley museums across the country, which goes to show that as long as trolleys are properly cared for, they are a practical investment that will serve a city for years to come.

CONCLUSION:

JOHN RODERICK: Around the world, and even in the United States, the trend is towards light rail.

GIL: Many cities are beginning to reconsider streetcars. San Francisco restored streetcar service on the #8 bus line in 1995 due to the success of San Francisco's annual trolley festival. Today, to much fanfare, the F line operates a series of PCC streetcars painted to honor the various cities, including Boston, that once operated PCC fleets.

GIL: Many more American cities are reintroducing streetcars and building new systems from scratch. Boston plans to extend the Green Line to Somerville and Medford in the near future along a private right-of-way, which would restore streetcar service in Somerville and Medford for the first time in over fifty years.

JOHN RODERICK: It was a network.

GIL: Boston's lines were truly a network, interconnected by dozens of hubs that enabled one to travel virtually anywhere in the city by streetcar. While Boston will probably never have as many streetcar lines as it once did, the city continues to invest in retaining the lines it still has, ensuring that its remaining infrastructure will continue to attract riders enamored with history for years to come.